

THE ART OF CROSS-CULTURAL BRANDING

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Lux is called 力士 (Strong Man) in China, a name contradicting the image of a young lady on its package. When the brand first entered the Chinese market in the early 1980s, a Hollywood actress was employed in one of earliest western TV commercials. While bathing herself in a large bathtub (certainly an exotic scene to the Chinese viewers at the time), she said in a soft seductive voice “I only use *Strong Man*. How about you?” This proved to be a huge success and Lux became a household name within weeks.

In Taiwan Lux is called 麗士 (Beauty), a name that matches with the image of young woman. Both names are pronounced with the exactly same sound and tone. This means that Lux has two different names with totally different images in the same language and culture. An explanation can be found from the ideological differences existing in the two parts of China. While 麗士 (Beauty) would be a perfectly acceptable name in the mainland China today it was certainly a problem back in the 1980s. Under the orthodox communist doctrine, “beauty” was related to the decadent bourgeoisie aesthetics.

Renaming brands in a foreign market is no straightforward process. As a language and culture loaded with symbolism and imagery, a direct translation can often lead to comical or negative results. For many international companies entering the Chinese market, the first barrier they encountered was the language. As the Chinese use characters based on ideograms and the majority of people are unfamiliar with the Roman alphabet, the international brand has to choose a proper Chinese name. This is a complicated task that requires a thorough understanding of Chinese culture as well as linguistic skills.

A study on brand renaming* has found that there are three common renaming methods: mixed translation is used most often (46%), followed by free translation (29%) and direct translation (25%). Direct translation maintains the phonetic link between the two names, i.e. the new name sounds like the original, but it has no specific meaning in Chinese. Free translation, on the other hand, gives a meaningful Chinese name but loses the phonetic link with the original. The mixed method seems

to be the most popular one among the three as it creates a new name that both sounds like the original and has a meaning in Chinese.

Other things being equal, a brand name that has some meaning to the consumer will be more easily recalled. In addition to linguistic issues, other factors that affect the translation/naming process are identified as follows;

- Reflecting product benefits or industry characteristics,
- Quality and brand positioning,
- Links to logo or packaging,
- Country of origin effect,
- Traditional values,
- Beliefs and customs,

Reflecting product benefits and brand positioning are the two largest groups. It is interesting to compare Coca Cola with Pepsi Cola. In their Chinese names 可口可乐 (Palatable and Enjoyable) and 百事可乐 (Hundred Things Enjoyable), the last two characters are the same. However, the difference in the first two characters set them apart. Coca Cola's name has a clear link with product benefits (可口); the repetition of character 可 makes the name rhythmic that enhances the name recall. In contrast, Pepsi's name is a poorer imitation without any distinctive feature.

Of 100 brands, three quarters are given a meaningful new name. Chinese names place more emphasis on meaning than sound. A meaningful name is crucial in developing both a mental image and favourable associations. Mercedes Benz is 奔驰 (Speed On). The sound and visual image of two characters (particularly, 驰 with a horse as radical) generate associations of speed, dynamism, performance and capability – the exact attributes that the German brand symbolises. Brand positioning is another important consideration. In the case of Canon, consider its old name 卡侬 (based on direct translation) with its new name 佳能 (based on mixed translation). 卡侬, though sounding very close to Canon, has no meaning in Chinese. In contrast, 佳能 (means Best Calibre in Chinese) is strategically desirable: it sounds appealing and generates an association of high quality.

A poorly conceived name could cause confusion to the consumer or harm the brand's equity. Although no simple rule can guarantee a good name, an understanding of the issues will help a company prevent the costly blunder of choosing the wrong one. The translation process gives an international brand not just a new name in Chinese, but also a distinctive local image. Take BMW as an example. To millions of Chinese consumers, BMW is 宝马 - a 'Precious Horse' rather than "*the ultimate driving machine*". A horse is generally perceived as a heroic creature in Chinese culture: there are dozens of idioms and legends describing its feats and it is a popular subject in traditional Chinese paintings. By adopting such a name, the brand can tap into the rich cultural deposits and create a favourable mental image in the consumer's mind.

The dilemma faced by the international brand is not about whether to choose a suitable Chinese name (it is a necessity in the majority of cases), but whether to maintain a western image or to create a more localised image. For example, Nike and Reebok have adopted very different brand image strategies. Nike maintains a standardised "fitness and performance" image in all of the markets it serves. Nike is translated into Chinese directly as 耐克, a name that has no specific meaning (though the first character means "durable") but has a distinctive foreign or western image and sounds more appealing. Its rival Reebok, on the other hand, customises its image on the basis of national differences. It is rendered as 锐步 (Dashing Step), a meaningful name that lacks a foreign image.

The challenge for international branding is to find a fine balance between the two strategies, as there are risks at both extremes. A pure global image that is alien to the national culture will not appeal to local consumers. On the contrary, a totally localised image will not benefit from brand assets of the original and find it hard to differentiate itself from the local competition. Unilever is a good case in point. A global brand, according to its chairman Michael Perry, is simply *a local brand reproduced many times*. For many years, the company has been actively pursuing localised branding strategy in China, localising all its international brands and acquiring successful local brands. Most Chinese consumers probably have no idea about Unilever's origin, it is perceived as a multinational company with a Chinese identity as its name suggests: 联合利华 (United Benefit China).

Renaming a brand in a foreign market can be a creative and value-added process when cultural issues and brand positioning are taken into consideration along with linguistic factors. It provides the international brand a rare opportunity to re-cast the brand in the new market; create a unique global-local image with built-in positioning attributes that enhance the brand equity of the original.

Questions for discussion

1. Global branding is a paradox. There may be global brands but their image, positioning and perception are influenced by the local market conditions, especially by the cultural differences. Discuss with examples. How do you define a global brand given the fact that its image varies in different markets?
2. Choose three global brands to investigate. For each brand, studying two websites (one in your own country and the other in the home country of the brand) to find whether there are any differences in terms of brand identity (name, logo and brand associations) and brand positioning (slogan, marketing communications etc).
3. Try to explain those differences you have identified above. What are the implications of these differences on the firm's marketing strategy in your own country?

Further readings

- *Fan, Y (2002) "The National Image of Global Brands", *Journal of Brand Management*, 9:3, 180-192

This paper presents a study of 100 international brands, focusing on the key factors that affect the meaning of these brands in the Chinese market. The paper can be downloaded free from:

<http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/bitstream/2438/1289/3/Global%2Bbrands.pdf>

- De Mooij, M (2005) Chapter 2 "the Global-local paradox in global branding" in *Global Marketing and Advertising*, 2/e, Sage Publications